Mystery, Magic and the Late English Enlightenment

That “secularization” is a correlative of “disenchantment” and that both are characteristic of modernity remain common assumptions—almost ruling paradigms—within the humanities and social sciences, despite recent misgivings. I want to contribute to these misgivings by thinking about disenchantment’s opposite, that is to say about enchantment itself, during and leading to the period of British history from about 1770 to 1800 which some historians have named the “late Enlightenment” since, after the immediate impact of Bayle, Locke, Spinoza and Newton’s conceptual innovations, a period of quiescence and “conservative enlightenment” (Pocock) is said to have set in. By the 1760s, after George III’s accession, a new generation, largely based in Rational Dissent, constituted another wave of radical and oppositional enlightenment, with the Bowood House group which included Jeremy Bentham, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley leading the way.

Let me take the admittedly rather simplifying position that modes of enchantment during the period takes two main forms which we can call “mystery” and “magic” which are themselves, internally divided. Once one makes that classifying move, it becomes apparent that, during the period, magic and mystery need to be thought, not together as forms of enchantment, but in opposition to one another. Magic belongs to different institutions, has different uses and effects than those of mystery. In particular: magic, in one of its forms at least, carried out the work of secularization, while mystery became a category to which an arm of the counter-enlightenment appealed.
I want to make this case by thinking about magic and mystery in relation to two further categories. The first of these is the division between public and private, which, ever since Habermas’s work on the bourgeois public sphere, has been regarded as no less important than secularization in accounting for the Enlightenment. The second is literature itself: I am interested in how late-enlightenment magic, on the one hand, and late-enlightenment mystery, on the other, took literary form, or rather how they took literary form in relation to the division between the public and the private. And let me say, without elaborating the point now, that magic and mystery have different affinities to literature just because, in the period, mystery, as a theological category, was primarily connected language, to Logos, while magic belonged mainly to performance and visual culture.

To mount this analysis, we need a more nuanced understanding of the classical opposition between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ spheres. Let’s think of the eighteenth-century public world along a triple axis: geographically, institutionally and discursively. In terms of geography, some social spaces were public and others were private, although many so-called public spaces were only commercially public. The theatres, coffee houses, and taverns were only accessible to paying customers, whose payments occurred through more or less thorough-going market mechanisms. Few actual institutions were public in the sense that, like the street, they were open to anybody: rather they were what we might call quasi-public. The three most important—the Anglican church, the schools and the formal system of political representation—were quasi-public in this sense. There is a sense in which anybody could join the Church and all
English subjects were regarded, unless otherwise identified, as Anglicans but nonetheless a particular rite—baptism—and a particular set of beliefs were required to attain and maintain membership. It was possible unwillingly to be excluded from the Church as were that section of the clergy who could not commit to the Liturgy as laid out in the Book of Common Prayer after Charles II’s restoration. On the passage of the Clarendon Code and Test Acts in the 1660 and 1670s, they and their congregations (as “Dissenters”) were formally denied most public or civil offices for over a century. As to civil society and politics: the franchise was of course restricted to forty shilling freeholders and, as just noted, full participation in formal civic institutions was in principle restricted to members of the Anglican Church across the century. The education system was also only available to those with money, and the universities were, of course, only open to Anglicans.

In terms of discourse, most print circulated commercially in commodity form (books and periodicals) and so was available, at least in principle, to all who could pay for it. (In practice, outside London, access to print depended on the vagaries of an inefficient distribution system). Books at least were mainly read in private spaces, and their readership could constitute a public which had no physical or filiative connection—which was, so to say, virtual. On the other side, some important forms of print, including those which helped constitute the literary field, if we consider literature just as polite writing, were in effect produced institutionally, and especially for and around the Established Church. They were then read primarily by the institutionally affiliated.

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In the period, magic took two forms: “real” and “secular”. Real magic names those forms of magic where magicians invoked supernatural powers to carry on actions in the world on behalf of personal interests. Leaving aside the deeply problematic, indeed oxymoronic, notion of religious magic, the most common form of real magic in the period was fortune-telling. On the other side, secular magic names magic or rather the presentation of magical effects which make no serious claim to supernatural power and which, characteristically aims to produce amazement by concealing its means of production. In terms of the public-private division that I have just outlined we can say that secular magic belonged mainly to the commercial public sphere, while real magic belonged to private life. One important reason for this was that real magic was, by and large, illegal as soon as it was deployed commercially.

Secular magic did not just belong to the commercial public sphere, it helped build it. In particular, the rapid expansion of London’s entertainment industry, especially from the 1770s on, relied on secular-magic shows whose prestige and ethical influence were slight but whose capacity to draw audiences was strong. Let me offer a brief conspectus of the forms that commercial metropolitan secular magic took. Most importantly it was deployed in legitimate drama’s centres: that is, in Covent Garden and Drury Lane, the only two London theatres licenced to offer spoken-word plays during the Season. After all, the most popular theatrical genre in the eighteenth century, and one that was unique to Britain—the so-called harlequinade—was in large part a special effects show. Especially early in the century, harlequinades tended to end an evening’s entertainment for an audience, many of whom paid half price just to see them.
But special effects were no means restricted to this genre: they were, for instance, integral to the masque, to the current-affairs representations which were inserted into dramatic forms of all kinds (as in for instance Phillipe de Loutherbourg’s production of the Grand Naval Review in 1773) as well as to the Gothic drama in the 1790s, and Shakespearean productions, particularly of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

Across the century the licensed theatres, decreasingly reliant on patronage, gradually became commercial enterprises in the modern sense. As a consequence they were continually rebuilt, each time increasing their size. Visits to these huge buildings were essential for tourists, who were expected to marvel at their splendour along with the technical ingenuity of their productions. The actors and actresses who were worked in them were famous as anyone in the virtual public created by the newspapers, and which, partly by virtue of their appeal and secular magic’s capacity to draw audiences, was being transformed the media and its publics as we know them.

At the same time various kind of more specialized, smaller-scaled secular-magic shows were also developed especially after about 1770. These were presented in purpose-built buildings, mostly on the eastern borders of the expanding West End. One such stands out—the Lyceum constructed just off the Strand in 1771 originally for a Society which intended to show fine-art objects there for paid entry. It exemplifies the logics of metropolitan secular magic entertainment with especial clarity. Between 1773-1809, the building was hired for events of all kinds with a range of entry prices from 1s to 5s: including, at the beginning, a debating society with serious pedagogic objectives; and subsequently, in no particular order, waxworks; the exhibition of a 13 year old
painter’s works; a series of conjurers; balloon exhibitions such as those by the European showman and conjurer Enslin; a so-called ‘Philosophical Fireworks’ display which was a demonstration of the properties of gases; an exhibition of paintings by Benjamin Vandergucht; Charles Dibdin’s pioneering entertainment, *The Whim of the Moment*; Mendoza the pugilist who exhibited and gave lessons there; animal displays including a rhinoceros and the Royal Lincolnshire Ox—according to advertisements, the largest and fattest ox ever seen; a Patagonian Savage, Patrick O’Brien the Irish Giant, Thomas Allen, puffed as ‘the most surprising small man’; part of the famous Orleans collection of Old Masters, and various science shows, including most famously Adam Walker’s orrery, the Eidouranion. ¹ Despite its displacement from the art world into a wider market, the space’s selling point remained its facilities and its cultural lustre, as appealed to in a characteristic 1799 advertisement for a comedy entertainment which attempted to sell itself by naming the theatre ‘elegantl...
the so-called ‘vampire trap’. A very successful special-effects adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* followed in 1823, and in 1824, the theatre hosted Weber’s magic opera *Der Freischütz*. The old Lyceum burnt down in 1830.

The Lyceum’s history traces a path in which secular magic culture moved away from internal heterogeneity marked by aesthetic indistinction between genres and art-forms to a more carefully managed entertainment industry organized around generic differences and whose most successful visually-based special-effects shows were increasingly tightly bound to narrative.

What, then, were the most successful literary equivalents to this entertainment sector? Two particular works stand out, both of which connected quite immediately to specific secular magic shows. The first is William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and the second is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1816).

*Vathek* was inspired by special effects produced in 1781 by de Loutherbourg for the slave-owner William Beckford, one of the few Englishmen rich enough to have a cutting-edge secular magic show produced in private space. Beckford hired de Loutherbourg to produce exotic and mysterious effects for his coming of age party, de Loutherbourg being the period’s most important stage and effects designer, and a would-be real magician to boot. Beckford wanted the party to turn into a satanic night of calm entrancement and intoxication, in which he would have sex with a young boy. To produce this night of magic, De Loutherbourg’s used techniques developed for his London show, the Eidophusikon

The Eidophusikon stands at the threshold of modern commercial visual illusionism. As probably had never happened before in entertainment history,
the auditorium lights were dimmed before the show started. Its audience was seated in front of a room-like box. Then a series of scenes were displayed: the most famous of which was a Pandemonium scene after *Paradise Lost*, whose demonic and hellish imagery were most likely used for Beckford’s party. These scenes consisted of meticulously painted, slowly unspooled pictures; transparencies which showed different images when lit from behind or in front; cut-out objects moving on hidden mechanical tracks or wheels. They were lit by concealed sources whose colours—controlled by glass filters—could alter gradually to create sunset or sunrise effects, or flare up like lightning. The visual effects were synchronized to music as well as to naturalistic sounds. In sum, the techniques of modern visual illusionism—darkness, concealment of the means of production, and synaesthetic synchronization—here come together for the first time.

Beckford’s party, whose pleasures he recalled his whole life, inspired *Vathek*. It’s an Oriental tale whose monstrous hero—the Caliph—delivers himself to a devil, for whom, as a pledge, he kills fifty young children. The Caliph descends to Eblis, a kind of Hell whose archictonetics and visual stylization owe much to de Loutherbourg’s Pandemonium scene. But on the way he encounters and becomes infatuated with an effeminate young boy who comes to stand as an emblem of purity and innocence.

Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was inspired by a different kind of showman: André-Jacques Garnerin. Shelley had seen Garnerin as a child and again about a year before writing her fiction. Garnerin was famous across Europe as the first person to make a successful parachute jump, and he used that fame to make his show-
business career. He presented a hybrid scientific lecture and conjuring show, which gloried in the possibilities that science now suggested, including that life could be artificially created by galvanism. In Shelley’s story, of course, the being whom science creates turns against both his creator and society as such, murdering the innocent in revenge for his own rejection by humankind. In that sense, it’s a riposte to Garnerin’s own magico-scientific triumphalism.

These two fictions, though both aim at the amazement characteristic of commercial secular magic, belong to different genres. They have different values and cultural affiliations too. But they are thematically twinned. Both insist upon what Vathek calls the “chastisement of blind curiosity”, curiosity in the service of overweening ambition, and both also centre on what I will call in a strong paradox, “innocent evil”. For all his crimes and delight in cruelty, for all his damnation, Beckford’s Caliph’s maintains a certain innocence not just because he is driven on by his sorceress mother but because his pedophiliac entrancement with a pure young boy, itself a form of curiosity, is expressive of his own inner purity. And Frankenstein’s monster, who, like the Caliph, kills the defenceless and undefiled, is himself innocent insofar as he is the victim of unremitting prejudice and failures of sympathy. That residual innocence allows him to the very end to account for, if not to justify, his crimes rationally from a position that has not itself been corrupted by the horror and fear of which he has been both cause and object.

The questions that this similarity between the two secular-magic texts poses are: first, why are they so insistent on rebuking curiosity and ambition, and second, why are they so concerned with innocent evil? The answer to these
questions are complex but it seems to me that the rebuke to ambition is, in large part, a ruse in both cases. Both texts show a world in which human power has been radically expanded, whether through science as in Shelley or through free-thought beyond received morality as in Beckford. And if, in both, the plot outcome of that expansion is death and horror, they also take advantage of language’s freedom to transcend the visual, so as to allow us not to identify with, but to delight in, their monstrous heroes, a delight that takes the form of amazement and awe at supernormal acts of power and will.

That both texts’ lessons against curiosity and ambition are qualified is clear I think from what is most remarkable about what they share, namely an emphasis on innocent evil. At this point it becomes pertinent to remind ourselves that entertainment magic, an essentially secular cultural domain, was not just a tool, but an expression, of popular enlightenment. This is important because in taking up the theme of innocent evil, secular-magic texts like Frankenstein and Vathek are drawing on a primary intellectual engine of European enlightenment. Without doing justice to a complex issue, let’s say that I am persuaded that both indirectly draw on Bayle’s critique of theodicy in his Dictionary (1697), namely his argument that, given the extent of human evil and misery, it is impossible to defend God against the charge that he propagates Satanic ends. Because natural theology had no power to justify the ways of God to men, Bayle contended that Christianity must rely more on faith than on reason, submitting to a moral world in which, as Dryden pithily put it in his Essay on Satire, God “can work Good out of Evil, as he pleases”. Against this, Leibniz, Samuel Clarke, William King and Edmund Law among others took up Bayle’s argument by substituting for sin and
evil a notion of contingent moral imperfection. This retreat destroyed the orthodox Christian anthropology based on original sin, and became a key strut of Enlightenment thought.

This constitutes the theological backstory to Shelley and Beckford’s fictions. But both novels further understand that once we move out of Christian anthropology, and take full imaginative grasp of the human mastery of the world, then new technologies, new subjectivities, and new moral possibilities and difficulties enter center stage all together. Both novels’ message is that in an immanent world, which knows Satan only as a fiction, and which secular magicians like de Loutherbourg and Garnerin project, not only will technological feats replace miracles and real magic powers, but innocence or purity will disappear alongside evil.

Let us now turn to mystery. Mystery also takes two forms in eighteenth-century Britain. Like magic, it was increasingly deployed to secular ends, perhaps most notably, from the 1780s on, in fictions in whose plots dark secrets were belatedly uncovered so as to intensify audience engagement. (These suspense narratives, however, only became known as “mysteries” in the twentieth century). But, unlike magic, mystery remained primarily a supernatural, indeed, a religious, concept. Most of all, it named Christian doctrines known only through revelation and faith, not through reason. This meant that mystery was tightly institutionally affiliated, and belonged not to the private or to the commercially-public sphere but, first, to the kind of quasi-public sphere constituted by particular religious denominations, and then, as we will see, to the restricted public institutions of the polity at large.
Ever since the early Christian era, the Trinity (i.e. the doctrine that God is three persons but one substance) had been Christianity’s most important and imposing mystery, albeit a mystery which lent itself to abstruse, more or less rational, theological elaboration and debate. The doctrine had become contentious again in Protestantism, since its actual basis in Scripture is doubtful. But, in the end, Anglicanism, like most other Protestant denominations, accepted Trinitarianism. Indeed the Athanasian and Nicene creeds, both written around the fourth century of the Christian era against Christological heresies, were all the more insisted upon as crucial doctrinal tests, as election and evil were reasoned away. John Pocock describes the logic by which those who denied the Trinity were denied the right of association in the 1690s:

Without that doctrine the Two Natures might not be fully met in Christ; there might be no church that represented Christ’s person, no person capable of exercising a divine presence; the Church of England would be separated from any action of Christ, and from the Catholic tradition that maintain the positions taken at Nicea and the other great councils, in the letters of Paul the apostle and the gospel attributed to John the apostle and evangelist. At the same time, however, during the English enlightenment, the notion of the Trinity as a mystery increasingly gave way to the Trinity as an object of theological speculation, in which it became psychologized, naturalized and socialized.

Yet, trinitarianism had become instrumental in more than the ecclesiological matters adduced by Pocock. On the side of doctrine, it became the lynchpin of resistance to natural theology. Politically, it anchored orthodox
resistance to the Whig hegemony—by which I mean the social order which favoured Erastianism, religious toleration, urbanization, urbanity, natural law, Parliament and commerce, as against the Tory affirmation of the Established Church’s autonomy and independence (or of its interpenetration of state and civil society); the rural estate, the bond between sovereign, God and people and so on. Indeed, I’d contend that the embrace of Trinitarian mystery by a hardline Tory minority needs to be understood more in theo-political than in doctrinal terms, although these are difficult to untangle from each other. That’s because, ultimately (and to use a rather Schmittian formulation which could not be then quite articulated in these terms) for Tory theo-politics the doctrine of the Trinity allowed theorists to figure the relations between the State, the Church and civil society as analogous to Trinitarian relations. They were three bodies of one substance. Perhaps the most widely circulated version of this line of thought is to be found (surprisingly in many ways) in Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, where God “wills [the State’s] connexion with the source and archetype of all perfection” (i.e. of Christ)—so that, in this case, the French destruction of the established state is seen as a form of sacrifice a la the Jews’ crucifixion of Christ. (Oxford World’s Classics, 98)

In support of this argument, let me simply list some of the key eighteenth-century Trinitarian controversies. In the 1690s Bishop Stillingfleet attacked Locke for the latter’s supposed Socianism (the doctrine that Christ is not of divine substance but was without sin and worthy of worship). That same decade, Charles Leslie joined the controversy over the Latitudinarian Archbishop Tillotson’s suspected Arianism (the doctrine that Christ, although divine, is not of
one substance with his father), and later continued his attacks on deists such as Anthony Collins, John Toland and Thomas Gordon, the latter of whom openly scoffed at “the mystery of the blessed Trinity” along with the priestcraft it legitimated. In the Bangorian Controversy over church government that followed the Hanoverian succession, William Law accused Bishop Hoadly of Arianism again. It is worth noting that neither Leslie nor Law were members of the formal Anglican confession, they both belonged to the non-juring Church, which could not accept the terms of the 1688 revolutionary settlement (the breaching of apostolic succession and the overthrow of divine right of kings) and who refused to sign oaths of allegiance to new monarchs in 1701 and 1715. Their hardline rejection of the Church’s subordination to the State intensified their Trinitarianism although Law himself, a major figure in the period’s English divinity and indeed in polite writing as a whole, had by the 1740s moved away from orthodox Trinitarianism, towards a more esoteric Behmenism. One reason for this shift seems to have been that by then, Anglican polemic theologians had aligned Trinitarianism to the Whig hegemony.

By the century’s end, as Scott Mandelbrone has shown, even Isaac Newton had been appropriated by orthodox Anglicanism. That was not the case earlier: in the period up to the 1740s, as news of Newton’s Arianism leaked out, the careers of his followers—the Anglican natural theologians, William Whiston and Samuel Clarke—were destroyed because they too rejected the Athanasian creed. The most important champion of orthodoxy in the battle against Newtonian anti-Trinitarianism was Daniel Waterland, who, along with the Latitudinarian Edmund Law, was successful in invoking the mysteries of the Trinity to chase
metaphysics out of English intellectual life, and so, ironically enough, to prepare the ground for a longlasting local climate of empiricism and positivism.

At approximately the same time, although at Oxford rather than Cambridge, the Hutchinsonians appealed to Trinitarianism against natural theology through a thorough-going esotericism, which shares something with Law’s later Behmenism. On the basis of John Hutchinson’s *Moses’ Principia* (1724), the Hutchinsonians argued that our best guide to understanding Nature was not rational analysis in a Newtonian mode but the Scriptures, including the Old Testament, since Nature is itself a form of Logos whose final purpose is to give allegorical expression to the mystery of divinity and divine creation. Nowhere is this clearer as in the so-called “names,” light, fire and air, each of which represents a person of the Trinity and whose true essence can only be signified in God’s first and undefiled tongue, Hebrew. The names are modes of God’s Logos capable of immaterially commanding nature, in a conceptual move that, in Trinitarianising nature, naturalizes the Trinity.

In 1750, following the publication of Bishop Clayton’s Arian *Essay on the Spirit*, another pamphlet war took place, with an important Trinitarian intervention being published by William Jones of Nayland, a key figure in the mutation from Hutchinsonianism into nineteenth-century Tractarianism. The century’s last major Trinitarian controversy followed the publication of the Unitarian Joseph Priestley’s *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* in 1782, and which was rebutted on behalf of orthodoxy, albeit not very convincingly, by Samuel Horsley, a High Churchman, friend of Samuel Johnson and Newton’s editor, who made his case on historical grounds and was awarded a bishopric for
his pains.

What consequential literary writing drew on the energies which also drove orthodox Trinitarianism through this series of controversies? Christopher Smart’s late religious poems, *Jubilate Agno*, *A Song to David* and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England* present, I think, the most obvious examples.

These poems were written around 1760, mainly during the time Smart was confined to a madhouse, for praying loudly in public places. *Jubilate Agno* and *A Song to David*, the most celebrated of the three, both use a Hutchinsonian typological and prophetic hermeneutic with esoteric, mainly Cabbalistic, elements. And *A Song to David* is a complex critical response not just to Bayle’s famous critique of David in the *Dictionary* but to Smart’s friend, Robert Lowth’s pioneering attempt to corral the Psalms to the Aristotelian liberal arts, and what Lowth himself thought of as a “beauty and taste” which “lie beyond the reach of vulgar apprehension.”¹¹ Recent criticism has attempted to align Smart to the Enlightenment, but in these works at least he belongs to the other side.¹² Especially in *Jubilate Agno* and *A Song to David* nature is an allegorical expression of religious doctrine, that is to say, a form of Logos. Historical time is replaced by prophetic and typological time so that it is possible to “look upward to the past.”¹³ The architectonics of the built world (“second nature” as we may call it) express, or ought to express, humankind’s relation to God, that relation being fundamentally one of submission. Submission is easiest for the poor, who are, thence, favoured by God. And, for Smart, man’s primary task in the world is neither social nor ethical but rather adoration and worship whether expressed in
orthodox liturgy or in private prayer or in religious poetry.

In *A Song to David* and most of all in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* this form of orthodoxy is placed in the service of a well-embedded Anglican Tory patriotism in which an alliance between the sovereign and the people had been imagined against the Whig oligarchy, and which was re-vitalised by George III’s accession to the monarchy in 1760. In a Tory spirit, Smart refuses enlightened theodicy, identifying “Satan’s snares and darts” (Smart 1990, 185) with Catholic Europe, especially France. George himself is a divinely consecrated sovereign and his army and navy possess a “pow’r divine” too (Smart 1990, 172) so that British imperial expansion relies on God’s might:

We thank thee for the naval sway
Which o’er the subject seas we claim;
And for the homage nations pay,
Submissive to the great Britannic fame;
Who soon as they the precious cross discern,
Bow lowering to the staff on our imperial stern. (Smart 1990, 171)

Perhaps the best way to annex Smart’s verse to my argument’s purposes is to concentrate on the Trinity Sunday poem in the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* sequence. *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* is hymnal, consisting of songs written to be sung on important days in the Anglican liturgical calendar. For his understanding of the liturgical calendar, Smart mainly followed the non-juror Robert Nelson’s widely disseminated handbook, which had originally been written within the moral-reform circles that established the Society of Promoting Christian Knowledge and Society for Propogation of the Gospel circa 1700. No
doubt Smart, a very poor man at this stage of his life, also wrote the book for commercial purposes, hoping for its widespread acceptance, perhaps even hoping the kind of success achieved by Keble’s *The Christian Year*, Britain’s bestselling book of poetry across the nineteenth-century, and which also consists of poems for important days in the Anglican liturgical year. At any rate, Smart’s implied readership is not so much the one drawn to secular polite writing one but the potentially larger one attached to the Church, not a virtual public as an ecclesiastical one.

Interestingly, Smart’s Trinity Sunday poem exalts the Trinity less for its mystery and more for its power to keep Satan at bay. This is not to say that Smart diverges from Nelson who, in his catechism for the festival, explicitly and quickly closes down upon what he calls “explication of this great Mystery” one of whose main purposes is to teach us “to submit our reason to the obedience of faith.” It is rather that Smart *assumes* the Mystery to the degree that he barely explores what relations between Father, Son and Holy Ghost might be, concerned rather with how the mystery of the Trinity in fact orders the world.

First of all, the mystery of the Trinity displaces all learning, and in particular, the philosophical tradition, or “the dull dispute/Of ostentatious gloom/In Athens or in Rome” (Smart 1990, 169). God’s “Almighty Word” and the Holy Spirit’s spiritual gift of languages to human beings (we might recall that the Pentecost or Whitsun has been celebrated the Sunday before Trinity Sunday) also stand against those books that “lead us from ourselves.” Here the Logos has not been incarnated, as tradition, into the human order of history, as it was, according to Gadamer, in a move by which Trinitarianism enabled secular history
as both a concept and a temporal order to emerge from out of scholasticism.\(^{16}\)
Instead, Smart’s Logos finds its power as ritual performance against both reason and linear time.

At the same time, social Trinitarianism is implied rather than articulated:
“One Lord, one faith, one font/Are all good Christians want”, Smart writes in a line whose pun on the word “Lord”, and whose presupposition that faith and community are correlates, allow us to read it as figuring the unity of state, church and civil society. Yet theopolitical structures are not here central, because, in another triplet, good Christians are primarily concerned with the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. In an anti-Lockean theory of identity which psychologizes Trinitarianism, perfect individuality is constituted by the unity of “angel, men and soul” through which individuals can “repose” in God and avoid the “doubt” that comes with books as well as (between the lines) avoiding civil resistance and party-division. Only in such an individuality can the theological virtues can be lived out in a unified society. And perfected Trinitarian individuality is capped by faith rather than grace, because it is informed by a truth that must “prevail”—namely, the truth that God is the only cause “of Nature or her laws.” For Smart, it is God, not any immanent Newtonian or Lockean regularity or causality, that controls and comprehends the beginning and end of things, and he does so as a Trinity who both acts on the world and models it on his mysterious form, down to the level of subject-formation.

Smart’s religious poetry clearly lies at a considerable intellectual and sociological distance from Shelley and Beckford’s secular novels. And, interestingly, the different virtual publics embodied in these texts’ readerships
and reception allow us some insight into that distance. As I have argued, *Frankenstein* and *Vathek* are both visual novels in the sense they partly rely upon visualizable effects and scenes—landscapes, buildings, bodies—to achieve their effect. And *Frankenstein* in particular has remained a popular novel not just because of its displacement of theodicy but because it has repeatedly been translated back into the visual media like that from which it first appeared: special-effects or magical theatre and film.

As I have also been arguing, Smart’s later religious poetry abuts not secular magic but religious Logos. But it failed to be taken up the Church—his hymnal, for instance, received almost no institutional support—and its original readership was tiny. It gained a wider readership only when it was inserted into modern university literature departments. Their pedagogy and scholarship was able to find and authorize a purely literary energy in Smart’s neglected later verse. Of course, to the degree that Smart’s readership is today an academic one, it cannot be said to invoke a virtual community except as this exists in debased form as “eighteenth-century literary studies” or some such. Yet the move from one tightly organized and relatively autonomous spiritual institution to another, from the Anglican church to the academic English department, has allowed Smart’s mysterious divine logos (as invoked for Anglican counter-revolutionary purposes) to live on as secular poetic force. This move attests to the continuing connection between the received mysteries of the word and the institutions of the spirit, not least in comparison to the continuing appeal of visual secular magic to commercial enterprise and consumers.


See J.C.D. Clark *English Society, 1660-1832*, 327ff.


B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, 136 ff who argues that there was no necessary connection between Hutchinsonianism and Toryism though it was high church. My own sense of the Hutchinsonians follows Aston, “Hutchinsonianism’ 627.


The tendency to create an enlightened Smart is clearest in the essays collected in Clement Hawes’s edited volume *Christopher Smart and the Enlightenment*.


The book responded to a widespread Anglican demand for a hymnal partly in response to Methodist singing and the belief that congregational singing would help missionary activity and community solidarity.